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ABSTRACT

New managerial techniques such as total quality management and similar worker participation programs are an important albeit controversial component of the recent changes in the workplace brought about by increasing globalization of the economy. In addition, organized labor is faced with a changing and increasingly diverse population of new workers who are generally less willing to accept unionization, more accepting of collectivism, and more accustomed to working for lower wages. Unions have traditionally resisted attempts to introduce employee involvement programs with few or no reasonable countermeasures, and management has traditionally failed to rationalize the need for employee involvement programs with organized labor or to provide ample opportunities for negotiation subsequent to implementing employee participation programs. Consequently, the success of employee participation programs has been mixed. Management has generally been unwilling to give up control, and unions have been unwilling to experiment with innovative work methods. Corporate stakeholders, management, and union leaders must all realize that their historic roles of conflict have crippled their ability to succeed and that trust and honesty on the part of management and unions alike is critical to the country's economic future. (Contains 29 references.) (MN)

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Worker Participation Programs in U.S. Industry: A Unionist's Perspective

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Structural changes in labor-management relations and changes in the way people work are being mandated by global competition. An important but controversial component of change in the workplace is management using techniques such as total quality control, total quality management, and similar worker participation programs. Critics have attacked worker participation as a tool for management control and as a means to weaken organized workers' power. Changes in organized labor and industrial relations have occurred not as the sole result of economic crises, but as a result of fundamental structural changes in the way American businesses are run to remain competitive. The most important trend of the past two decades influencing industrial relations has been the decline in union and collective bargaining (Kochan & Piore, 1985).

Global competition, especially from basically non-union Asian firms and other Newly Industrialized Countries (NIC's) has been identified as one of the primary influences on U.S.corporate management. Japanese-developed management techniques and worker participation programs have changed the structure of American business, especially in traditionally unionized industries such as automotive and steel. Worker involvement, teamwork, quality circles, and employee participation have become the "buzzwords" of business. Strauss & Rosenstein (1970), identified participation as the most overworked word of the decade. According to Kochan (1985), models of worker participation will lead to corporate efforts to improve productivity through increased communications and development of new patterns of involvement with individual employees and small groups. Despite such positive pronouncements, some critics of employee participation programs assert that they are a subterfuge intended to divert attention from American workers' lack of autonomy and power (Grenier & Hogler, 1991).

Organized labor is faced with a changing and increasingly diverse workforce of new workers traditionally less willing to accept unionization, more accepting of collectivism, and more accustomed to working for lower wages. The primary sociological explanation for organized labor's ability to cooperate in participation programs is change in the labor force. Along with

economic pressures, these social changes are taxing not only unionization rates but also the ability of unions to favorably negotiate and positively contribute when faced with employee participation programs on the job. As employee participation continues to increase in popularity, so will the need for organized labor to decide and act on a response to this growth.

Organized Labor in Transition

Unions developed gradually as instruments of the working man's [woman] struggle for decent working conditions and terms of employment. They are well adapted to the primary issues that dominated industrial relations in the past (Hirszowicz, 1981). Whether they can cope with organizational structural changes and challenges facing today's corporations remains to be proven.

If the development of unions is a product of capitalism, their fate then is the product of class struggle through workplace democracy. Their role and character is determined by the society in which they operate, but they have proven to be, at least in the West, powerful agents of social change (Hirszowicz, 1981). Many believe the decline in union membership and union strength reduces the quality of life for the country and weakens the efforts of those struggling for a better society. Conversely, unionism can be described as a "...rejection of free markets, open competition, and individual freedom in favor of their opposites: monopoly power, private coercion,and aggrandizement of personal rule" (Hirszowicz, 1981,p.264) Fenwick and Olson (1986), added that unions are not concerned with control of the workplace, but only with obtaining extrinsic benefits for members and leaders.

Historically, power in the workplace belonged to those with rights of property ownership (Marx, 1971), and the control of technology and knowledge of work processes (Parsons, 1984). The evolution of modern management's influential human resource policies began with Taylorism, better known as scientific management, which gave rise to Weberian hierarchical and bureaucratic authority structures. These systems were designed to de-skill and strip workers of their skills,

knowledge, and their ultimate control over the production process. Howard (1985), added that industrial unionism rests upon, and presupposes Taylorism.

Industrial conflict arises out of the tension between management control systems and worker's resistance to control. As a result of this conflict, organized labor became a powerful force during industrialization of the U.S. Edwards (1977) offered three management strategies used to influence workers and maintain control over work processes: (a) simple control, (b) technical control, and (c) bureaucratic control. Today, U.S. industry and especially organized labor, is struggling with the transition from management based on bureaucracy to other systems of control, namely employee participation.

Changes in management techniques or behaviors might not necessarily indicate a fundamental shift in management's historically anti-union philosophy. Corporate attempts to oppose, weaken and to break unions has a long history, but "union avoidance" activities of the recent past brought in a decade of "new" capitalist offensives (Goldfield, 1987).

The union avoidance strategies of employers of the 60's and 70's coupled with current changes have evolved into innovative human resource management systems designed to reduce the desires of workers to organize. One of the most popular strategies is the use of employee participation programs. These strategies presume to promote organizational and individual flexibility, communication, involvement, commitment, and motivation. These strategies could be simply another form of organizational control.

Unionization seems to work best in mass production, long-run, standardized product manufacturing, and in the construction trades. Today's specialized markets and "lean" manufacturers require innovative human resource systems. According to Kochan and Piore (1985), the result of these new markets and manufacturing systems is that job-control unionism supporting tight job classifications of the scientific management era has become more burdensome and costly than non-union systems. Boyett and Conn (1991) stressed that labor must recognize

that traditional adversarial roles must change. The need for staunch union activities such as strikes and processing grievances diminishes in a workplace built on shared responsibility. Quoting from a labor management symposium Boyett and Conn (1991) said that "...unless organized labor develops a new vision of itself, it risks becoming stuck in a defensive, reactive position...the practical question then, is: What is the role of labor unions in new worksystems?" (p.259)

Workers want participation. Unions are a testament to this need. Management's position however, is dedicated to maintenance of control. Oswald (1986), added the Marxist view that workers seek a proper share of the wealth that they produce. They want a "larger piece of the pie" (p.26) than management would normally provide without the influence of bargaining. Labor unions seek an equitable redistribution of wealth. This implies conflict, but conflict need not be a permanent state.

Continuing to provide labor to organizations of the future will require that unions contemplate their role in participation versus adversity and conflict. Participation can be viewed as either a vessel to provide industrial democracy to workers, or as a coercive method intended to weaken unions and worker's power.

Control and freedom in organizations

Organizations are assumed to be voluntary associations, advocating free exchange between employees for their mutual benefit. But how much freedom do workers have, especially within organizations in highly competitive markets, with rampant unemployment, and record lay-offs ? According to Keeley (1987), mutual agreements made between participants define the organization. Mutual however does not imply equality. Agreement to an organizations' rules, policies, and procedures does not necessarily mean voluntary consent.

Basic freedoms and worker rights have been purposely erased from many U.S. corporations. "Once a U.S. citizen steps through the plant or office door at 9 a.m, he or she is

nearly rightless until 5 p.m., Monday through Friday" (Ewing, 1981, p.111). Lack of freedom and rights is more pronounced in organizations with no labor representation. Rightlessness and lack of freedom are most evident for employees who do not belong to unions, especially for white [and pink] collar employees (Ewing, 1981).

Social scientists and economists such as Etzioni and Galbraith identified organizations as "coercive", based on application of physical sanctions; "utilitarian", applying control over material resources such as money and rewards; and, "normative" organizations that rely on control of symbolic rewards (Hirszowicz, 1981). Membership in a labor organization does not assure a worker freedom or autonomy.

Unions have been criticized for being more interested in the physical and material conditions of work e.g. seniority, pay, hours, and safety, than in liberty or independence for workers. Unions, like other large organizations, tend to develop oligarchic structures, giving officials power, reducing internal opposition, and minimizing the participation of rank-and-file members. This oligarchy reduces worker democracy while increasing their apathy toward union participation. Freeman and Medoff (1984), offered an opposing view of unionism's effect on worker freedom. They write that unionism "...fundamentally alters the operation of management's power within enterprises... [power] is curtailed...so that worker's rights are likely to be better enforced..." (p.18).

Freedom can be defined as a lack of coercion. In most work transactions, one individual's (worker or group) choice is motivated by inducements such as money, provided by others (management or owners). Coercion implies an inducement where the worker (work group or union) is compelled to act against his or her will or best interest (Keeley, 1987).

Unions theoretically exist to represent the will and interest of the group. Economic pressures and changes can be viewed as such an inducement. Low wages can be considered a coercive transaction, since a worker's consent to wages below market as a result of competition or

management directive must arise from economic desperation and be involuntary. "Freedom is best understood," wrote Keeley, (1987), "as a contestable concept whose meaning is relative to the observer's preconceptions of fundamental human rights" (p.257). Human rights are moral issues held simultaneously and equally by all within a given society. Rights are retained by each person without jeopardizing the equal right of another. A right to a job or work cannot meet this definition. Because of the way work is structured everyone cannot hold that right at the same time. Someone else must serve to supply the job or work. That makes one person subordinate to another (Reynolds, 1984). Awareness that freedom and coercion are derived from human rights helps to understand related concepts such as subordination and control in the workplace.

Work responds to a basic and profound need in human nature, it plays a powerful role in the psychological, economic, and social aspects of a worker's life. Work has been called "...a basic or central institution." (O'Toole, 1981, p.13). Defined as an activity that produces something of value for another person or an organization gives work social and productivity meanings. Production and consumption imply some form of property ownership, providing some members of society the right to withhold the use of property. This dominate/subordinate relationship, according to Heilbroner (1985), defines the act of work itself. The condition of subordination helps interpret work as a means of social control by those owning or controlling resources and the necessity of those seeking access to resources to surrender a portion of their production and freedom to those in control. "Thus the act of work, as the manner in which human energy is concerted under civilization, is inextricable from exploitation" (Heilbroner, 1985, p.13).

Capitalism is the primary source of change in the act of work. The fundamental reasons that workers agreed to give up portions of their production to obtain resources were hunger and fear. Heilbroner (1987), added that survival was the principle reason why workers showed up at the hated and feared mills and mines of the early days of capitalism. Today, many in the Third World are motivated by hunger and fear, while in the West work is viewed as a desirable if not

essential condition of life. Capitalism has created the new work value of success, the reward of power and prestige as a result of work (Heilbroner, 1987). Subordination, although now almost subliminal, remains in a "..relinquishing of control over one's work life, a surrender of the autonomy of the body and mind to a pace and to movements designed [and controlled] by another" (Heilbroner,1987, p.20)

Work today holds for the individual worker much more overt freedom than in the past. For the collective working man or woman, submission to the system still exists, and in some cases, demands subordination through the subterfuge of participation.

A participatory management concept imported from Europe is industrial democracy. At the worker level, works councils and worker committees have power of codetermination. Management must attempt to get their support before implementing certain changes affecting workers. Theoretically, the system has attributes that reject centralism and provides: (a) a focus of attention on individual worker, or employees in general, in contrast to the masses, (b) a new goal of employee commitment to the objectives of industry, not class struggle, (c) a challenge to the principle that managers must manage and workers must obey, and (d) a growing acceptance of participation based on egalitarianism, assuming improvements in worker's social status (Hirszowicz, 1981). The European system is far from perfect. "The system is like a bomb waiting to explode" (Reynolds, 1984, p.225). From management's standpoint, the idea of industrial democracy is appealing. Participation of workers in decision making will make them more satisfied in their work, more inclined to identify with management prerogatives, and less likely to seek organization. Social reformers on the other hand, believe that industrial democracy provides an alternative to the problems of alienation of the worker and an instrument of resistance against dictatorial leadership and management.

Alienation has not disappeared, its character has changed. Workers are subject to domination by new, coercive forces. Fromm (1973, p.93), added, "...a man...[woman] ceases to

be an end in himself, and becomes the means for the economic interests of another man, or of an impersonal giant, the economic machine." Thus, capitalism creates a system where humans are transformed into "things" through labor, while labor should incorporate participation based on innovation, creativeness and independence. In many experiments with participatory management the positive impact of the democratic style of management has been demonstrated, yet there remains worker resistance and apathy toward such participator programs

Employee Participation Programs in Perspective

Working-class consciousness (solidarity) has been studied as workers' conceptions, images, attitudes, and responses to the social environments in which they work. These studies provided insights into job enrichment, quality of worklife (QWL), quality circles (QCC's), total quality management (TQM), and other worker participation and labor-management cooperation programs.

Unions are one response to the need for solidarity and a collective voice in the work environment. Unions can give members a feeing of participation, solidarity, of community with their fellow workers. According to Reynolds (1984), workingmen's associations are as consistent with free and growing societies as are any other voluntary organizations. They can provide workers with a means to voice their concerns to management, and improve the relationship between worker and supervision. These improvements can reduce absenteeism and enhance productivity and encourage management to invest in training.

Unions differ from most cohesive groups, however, in their reliance on the notion of a common enemy, the employer (Reynolds, 1984). In the past, when unions sought greater participation in workplace decisions, they found management unwilling and protective of its power. Industrial organizations in particular have been operated as autocratic institutions. Workers were hired to do specific tasks, hired to labor, with no right to use his/her experience,

mind, or desires to be involved with decision-making processes (Camens, 1986).

The progression of U.S. management-directed participation programs has generally followed the international history of quality control, quality assurance, total quality improvement, and "lean" production in the workplace. These programs are not completely alien in structure to the organization of traditional U.S. management. Japanese worker participation systems are just as hierarchical and bureaucratic, in their own right. The simulation of typically Asian culture-driven improvement programs does not assume that U.S. management's basic philosophy of control of workers' power has changed. Whether a reaction to economic pressure or to adjust to social values, managements' interest in participation and decision making systems overtly seems to stem from its recognition of the worth in involving workers in sharing of information and in making decisions concerning their work. According to Parsons (1984), however, this acceptance is a realization that the traditional approach of scientific management has become counterproductive to effective control of a new, more educated and aware work force. The new "enchanted corporation" promises to provide for workers' needs by replacing the rules and regulations of negotiated contracts with the good feelings, high commitment, and trust of the corporate culture. Antiunionism is thus disguised as participation, used to systematically erode union power, all in the name of increased productivity and flexibility (Howard, 1981). Theoretical purposes of participation programs are to democratize the workplace and improve productivity and quality. Democratization is a process that attempts to increase employee influence, especially in decision-making. Parsons (1984) added that worker's rights to a voice in decision making in the workplace has not been a hallmark of American business and industry. Therefore, even cosmetic participation programs have had appeal, especially to workers accustomed to routine, undemanding or de-humanizing work.

For almost three decades, participation programs have been enamored in U.S. industry. Greenberg (1975), said that participation not only serves utilitarian goals for workers and

companies, but also fosters personal development of the workers involved, creating a more responsible, confident, tolerant, and civic-minded workforce. Worker participation programs can also bolster intrinsic rewards and motivation schemes for the worker. This is especially true during economic recessions and high unemployment. Management substitutes intrinsic rewards for extrinsic rewards e.g. money. In times of economic downturn, worker participation programs had found their niche in non-unionized organizations (Grenier, 1988). Wells (1987) added that employers facing profit and budget constraints often present participation programs to their workers as a kind of substitute for better pay and benefits. "...this tradeoff between economic concessions and 'political' concessions implies a reversal of the pattern of collective bargaining..." (p.5). This entrenchment provides a vehicle to identify the true initiators of participative programs because they highlight the fact that management holds dominant power in control of such programs. Joyce (1985) added that "...participation is meaningful only when it arises from the workers' own self-organization." Without strong organizations like trade unions to express workers' needs, worker involvement may become superficial.

There is a difference between protecting workers from management influence and coercion and providing them with actual control over decisions. Analysts of participation as a form of control point to three methods by which participation can be used to control workers. First, workers can be informed and made to understand work from the perspective of management. Second, management can limit participation activities to unimportant aspects of the operation, so that no real management power is surrendered. Third,management can use intimidation to make workers, especially in teams and other quality-related groups, submit to managerial interpretations of workplace problems (Grenier & Hogler, 1991). Some studies point to education and skill level as determinates of participation (Yankelovich, 1979); while other studies have found that participation is supported most by highly paid, economically secure workers (Fenwick & Olson, 1986).

Worker participation programs

Joint labor-management partnerships over the past ten years have sought to address issues of productivity and quality through quality of work life (QWL) and other employee participation programs such as Quality Circles (QC's) with varying degrees of success. In a survey of QWL and Employee Involvement (EI) programs in union facilities conducted by Kochan,Katz, and Mower, (1984), employees reported that they wanted a considerable amount of say over the issues typically associated with participation programs, namely, the way work is done. However, they also reported that there was no evidence that workers participating in QWL actually experienced greater say or influence over workplace issues. In another study of QWL in an automotive manufacturing environment, Wells (1987), reported that the relationship between QWL and management rights is the key issue. QWL actually increases management power, "...a softer, subtler management-control strategy, yet one that is more ambitious and all-embracing than anything seen before." (p.5) Robertson, Rinehart, and Huxley (1991), reported on lean production techniques in a unionized Canadian auto manufacturer, and found teamwork and flexibility part of a reluctant accommodation to Japanese production practices by the UAW union. Workers seemed to be caught in the middle of a battle for control. "The union and the company are locked in a struggle for the hearts and minds of the workforce" (Robertson, Rinehart, and Huxley, 1991, p.14).

Few experiments with labor-management cooperation and worker participation programs have been rousing successes, and few have been abject failures. What is clear is that unions' attitudes toward employee participation has changed. According to Oswald (1986), U.S. trade organizations have not pursued an end to employer-employee relationships, as Marx did; rather unions want to participate in employee participation programs that serve utilitarian goals of workers, companies, and the union. This does not imply no adversity. Cooperation and advocacy with occasional conflict coexist in most healthy relationships. Response to adversity affects the success of participation programs. Unions must focus more on intrinsic issues of worker control

and subtle management coercion tactics and less on extrinsic issues such as strikes and grievances. The result may be improved productivity and quality, and more harmony between management and organized labor.

Many believe that the political survival of unions rests with labor-management cooperation. Grenier (1988) reported "...if unions do not participate in the design and administration of programs, not only will QC's [QWL, TQM, etc.] not work, but management will benefit from the failure" (p.5). Trying to increase employee participation will be associated with management's attempt to keep the U.S. competitive, thus discouraging employees from identifying with unions. Although many participation programs have failed, they have attained what Grenier called the "status of socially approved experiments." Companies (management) will gain respect from employees and the community through these "socially approved" programs, regardless of their underlying intent. Embracing participation programs based on short-term pilot studies with questionable results is a mistake. U.S. executives embrace participation programs as the savior of American competitiveness while most Asian-based international firms downplay their importance. One of the reasons for the downplay is that participation programs such as Quality Circles in Japanese firms have a coercive aspect, with control from the top down continuing to dominate the small-group environment (Grenier, 1988).

While "macro-competition" between companies is healthy, intra-group competition among organizational groups is detrimental to growth. Japanese firms have used the cultural aspect of intra-group cooperation to the benefit of participation programs, while U.S. firms, with a more diverse workforce, have not. Management is able to "play off" workers in different groups and units of the same company against each other in ways that undermine worker solidarity (Piore,1985).

Changes in worker demographics could have an impact on employee participation programs within a union environment. Percentages of blue collar workers, with traditionally

higher percentages of union membership, are on the decline (Goldfield, 1987). Minorities have not been adequately represented in organized labor. African Americans and other minority workers have been reluctant to become unionized due to a perception of unions as racists organizations. Conversely, attitudinal data from a number of sources indicated that black workers are far more receptive to joining unions than are white workers. This may be attributed to the need for more extrinsic rewards. Unionization provides economic advantages for those workers at the lower end of the pay structure. Nonwhite workers, however, have become increasingly more organized than white workers over the last decade (Goldfield, 1987). Women workers are less organized than men, and constitute a rapidly growing segment of the labor force. Women are likely to support group oriented work environments offered by unions. Kochan (1984), noted that women are more likely to vote for unionization than men in a non-union work setting. More minorities and women in the workforce will affect the success of employee participation programs in both union and non-union settings. Traditionally underrepresented in unions, and traditionally lower paid, these employees will most likely and primarily seek economic security over social equality in the workplace, thus creating an environment where management control can flourish. Additionally, the importance of social relations and cultural solidarities to women and minorities may affect the success of participation programs.

Summary & Conclusions

Employee participation in unionized organizations has a dual purpose: first, as a possible means to improve the competitive position of an organization, and secondly, as a means of management control. Unions have resisted many attempts to introduce employee involvement programs with little or no reasonable counter-measures. Management has failed to rationalize the need for employee involvement programs with organized labor, or to provide ample opportunity for negotiation subsequent to IE implementation. Success of participation programs is mixed. The

expectations of such programs have been stifled by the lack of trust and opposing objectives of management and organized labor. Management unwilling to give up control, and unions unwilling to experiment with innovative work methods.

Participation is an important concern in a democratic society. The right to have a voice in decision-making, and the opportunity to exercise those rights, is the basis of American democracy. In many cases, these rights have not been afforded to U.S. workers. Worker's rights to a voice and the opportunity to make economic and managerial decisions have been absent especially in the unorganized, non-union workplaces. Participation, while still a goal, has been limited in nature. Corporation's attempts to break unions are one response to the need to lay a foundation for participative approaches to management. They seek to create a community spirit and strengthen their employees' bonds to the company while crippling unions' power and influence. As in an earlier era, management can then pursue repressive strategies as they attempt to forge "family-factory relations" creating a semblance of worker power without the ability to realize it (Fantasia,1988).

The decline in membership in organized labor is not as important as the decline in approval among the working public. According to Boyett and Conn (1991), labor's approval rating dropped from 75% in 1957 to about 55% in the late 1980's. Membership declined from 33% of the workforce in 1950 to less than 14% in the early 1990s. This decline deflates organized labor's ability to provide a collective voice to workers who would otherwise be unorganized and unable to be heard politically (Freeman and Medoff, 1984). Unions are an attempt to gain solidarity while reducing worker competition and conflict. Unions involvement in the political arena brought about fundamental human rights legislation such as child labor laws and safety regulations, gathering the collective strength of workers, whose only power in bargaining with their employers and influencing the state was in their unified numbers (Goldfield, 1987).

In the age of "enlightened organizations" and a teamed workforce human relations

techniques have served management by espousing participation programs as a benefactor of workers' interests, no matter where they are located in the production process. The use of human and industrial relations techniques to convince and manipulate through training and group development has reflected management's need to control the workforce while maintaining "community spirit" and the"socially correct" stance of remaining competitive with the new "economic enemy": Japan and the rest of the world. Human relations has been used by management to provide workers with an alternative to unions by offering workers a way to satisfy their emotional and social needs on the job. In a capitalist society management's objective has always been and remains "bottom line". Improved productivity and quality is the real goal, not increased workplace democracy or worker satisfaction.

Today, organizations theoretically have dual missions: to make a profit and to provide workers reasonable employment. Management is charged with the responsibility for these missions. Management too has developed a duality of purpose, a "split personality". Management wields a club in one hand heavy enough to crush even the most ardent unionist's skull, while the other hand is wrapped in the velvet glove of human relations" (Grenier, 1988, p.185). As the U.S. enters a new decade, organized labor faces its most formidable challenge, what Freeman and Medoff (1984), called "the slow strangulation" of private sector unions. Many feel the implications of a decline in organized labor's voice will be far-reaching for society as a whole. As the workforce struggles with technological and economic change, the one institution that has successfully represented workers' and provided a means to improve workers' skills and abilities is being destroyed. The idealism of participative management, employee participation, and other TQM-like programs have been manipulated by management not solely for utilitarian purposes, but to increase worker control and effectively block union organizing. "But most disturbing of all," Howard (1985) added, "is the possibility that we shall lose the social vision that has been organized labor's greatest contribution to American society, the conviction that work is a

public activity and that the workplace, like any other institution in society, should be open to democratic decision-making and choice" (p175). Both corporate stakeholders, management and union leaders must realize that the historic roles of conflict have crippled their abilities to succeed. What the workforce of the future requires is an environment of trust and honesty. Trust to build an economic future, and honesty to build teams of workers dedicated to the same objectives. Workers neither manipulated nor coerced by corporate entities or labor organizations. Only then will workers believe that there is hope for the ideal of workplace equality and democracy.

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